

The potential of active listening for sustaining appropriate behaviour among young children

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> Aim

To investigate the role of active listening in sustaining appropriate behaviour among young children in a primary school for children with emotional and behavioural difficulties (EBD).

> Dimensions of this Case Study

This study focused on interactions between 27 children in the Early Years department and 13 adults: 3 teachers, 8 support staff and 2 voluntary helpers.

> Summary of Findings for this Case Study

- This study used apparently incidental classroom language, integral to the way of working in the Early Years' classroom, to develop listening skills in the children.
- Children were taught to listen, interpret and selectively act on spoken messages. This process was referred to as active listening.
- Active listening skills were taught in integrated classroom contexts, reducing the need for specially designed activities.
- Key features of adult communication which promoted active listening and sustained appropriate behaviour included: a quiet, calm voice; careful use of intonation, vocabulary and gaze; an exaggeratedly slow pace of delivery; extended pauses; frequent repetition; and positive assertions, about the child and their behaviour.
- Adults modelled communication patterns which encouraged regulatory speech in the children and demonstrated the potential to sustain controlled behaviour.
- Active listening contributed to non-confrontational behaviour management.
- The incidences of active listening directed towards behaviour management that were observed, enabled the children to make guided choices about their behaviour.

Definition

Active Listening is defined as the ability to interpret and selectively act on spoken messages. The teaching of active listening aimed to enable children to:

- secure attention;
- sustain attention;
- understand the spoken message;
- decide how to respond to the message.

Within this study active listening techniques often involved:

- one adult providing a commentary on an incident or activity happening in the classroom, which suggested appropriate behaviour; and
- conversations between two or more adults, which were intended to be overheard by children. These provided opportunities for the adults to repeat and clarify meaning without any emotional involvement so that the child could actively listen, process and respond appropriately. At the same time pupils had several opportunities to decode what they had heard.

Background

This project took place in the early years department of a primary school for children with Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties (EBD). The children were aged between four and eight years old and had Statements of Special Educational Need that identified EBD as their primary difficulty.

Spoken language between adults and children is fundamental to all areas of the curriculum. Each conversation between an adult and children provides a potential opportunity for the adults to support or sustain children's appropriate behaviour. Language is, however, only one element of an active behaviour management programme.

Apparently incidental classroom language was the focus of this study. The language samples observed were integral to the everyday working of the classroom. They were not part of a specific active listening intervention programme.

Aims of the project

A frequently cited characteristic of children with EBD is their poor response to listening tasks, (DfE Circular 9.94). This project set out to investigate a possible relationship between, so called active listening techniques and behaviour management.

What I did

Within the course of one week I recorded fourteen hours of video observation of adults and children working together.

I discussed the video material with members of the early years team. We identified occasions when behaviour management and active listening were taking place simultaneously. I transcribed the conversations from the video evidence.

Detailed analysis of the conversations identified patterns of communication. The findings of this study were rooted in this evidence.

The main findings

Active listening was embedded in our practice

Active listening was used throughout the day in contexts which were important to the children. It challenged the children's listening skills and sustained appropriate behaviour, e.g. at snack time, the adult's casual comment that she was looking for someone who was sitting quietly helped to calm a noisy and restless group of children.

By using real situations to work with listening skills the children were encouraged to listen, monitor their understanding and participate in the intrinsic rewards of the curriculum.

Features of adult language identified by this study

When adults used active listening strategies to mediate the children's behaviour they used:

- a quiet voice and supportive intonation;
- positively phrased language;
- a slow pace with frequent repetitions;
- language only slightly more sophisticated than that of the pupils'.

Active listening promoted non-confrontational language

The teacher, by making simple statements, restricted pupils the opportunity to enter into discussion of unacceptable behaviour. Children were deterred from joining in conversations and in this way confrontations were prevented.

"Leanne's in the cupboard"

In this illustration the teacher (T), in a class with 9 children, was working with 5 children on a writing task. The other children were engaged in different tasks. The teacher had her back to the computer, role play area and a large walk-in cupboard. The latter was out of bounds to the children.

After a while Martin (M) attempted to draw the teacher's attention to Leanne, who was creeping quietly into the cupboard.

M: Miss (pointed to cupboard).

T: (barely glanced up and continued as if engrossed in her writing at the table)

T: Leanne's not in my cupboard.

(with the matter of fact intonation of a statement of fact).

After a slight pause Leanne moved away from the cupboard and back into the main part of the classroom. A few seconds later the teacher looked up casually to ensure that Leanne was working.

The teacher limited Martin the opportunity to enter into discussion and, by remaining focussed on the writing. Children strictly adhered to the classroom rule that children were not allowed in the cupboard. The teacher affirmed this in her statement. By controlling the content of the interaction the teacher avoided the possibility of inflaming negative emotional responses in the children.

The above interaction took two minutes. The teacher consistently portrayed unhurried calm. There were extended pauses between what was said and done. This gave Leanne ample time to decode what was actually said, think about the alternatives available to her and then decide which course to take. The extra time seemed to be beneficial for young children who may have language or communication difficulties and required additional time to process language.

Comments about the children's behaviour were delivered as asides which purposely restricted interaction. When children interjected in conversations their comments were usually brief and carefully controlled by the adults.

Adults deliberately talked together making positively phrased statements about desirable behaviour. Comments highlighted behaviour that adults were expecting and avoided referring directly to the unacceptable behaviour.

"If Donald's quiet"

Donald (D) was slow to get dressed after PE, easily distracted and noisy. The Learning Support Assistant (LSA) was preparing work for children on the computer. A parent helper (P) was choosing children to decorate cakes for the Christmas Sale. The teacher (T) was writing with individual children.

LSA: oh...if Donald isn't ready I won't be able to ask him to help me.

D: I'm being quick I'm being quick.

LSA: Jimmie, come and help me.

D: ooooooh (continues fussing over dressing).

T: I'm just listening to quiet people in the book corner.

P: Donald hasn't had a go here yet.

T: Oh well, if Donald is quiet enough Ann, you could ask him to help you with the cakes.

P: I'll be listening then.

In the example, the criteria for Donald to join in the most desirable activity (working at the computer) was 'being ready'. Once it became clear that Donald had missed his first choice activity, the teacher stepped in with the merest suggestion that other alternatives were available. The parent extended the topic by 'reminding' the teacher that Donald had not helped with the cakes. This gave the teacher a further chance to talk about Donald being quiet. The parent neatly rounded off the episode by reaffirming the criteria for joining her group.

Overall Donald had five opportunities to engage with the idea that the quicker he dressed the greater the choice of activity that would be available to him. The pace of conversation in this example enabled the child to make choices and to take control of his behaviour.

Children were not criticised but their behaviour was discussed by the adults within the children's hearing. Commentary on the children's behaviour was based on factual observation and avoided emotional responses. Intonation and vocabulary suggested gentle disbelief rather than reprimand. Behaviour management had a light touch as adults gently suggested appropriate behaviour.

Children were enabled to make guided choices about their behaviour

The adults did not control or coerce the children but provided a commentary which identified appropriate behaviour. Adults made precise statements, softly suggesting ways in which children might achieve acceptable behaviour. A supportive tone gave the impression of adults acting as guides.

Comments were spoken slowly, had exaggerated pauses and were repeated or rephrased. Children take longer to process

information so the lack of urgency gave children time to consider and formulate their responses.

Active listening encouraged collaboration between adults and children to sustain acceptable behaviour. Children were given cues to resolving their own difficulties.

Can active listening be used to teach children how to control their own behaviour?

Active listening was shown to be helpful in stimulating appropriate behaviour. It may have also provided a model that the children could imitate when attempting to control their own behaviour.

Luria (1961) suggested that children use spoken commentary to regulate their own behaviour and develop understanding. In this study I observed adults monitoring their own and the children's behaviour. The adults appeared to be providing examples of speech being used to regulate behaviour which encouraged regulatory speech in children.

Other issues raised by the project

A complex relationship between developing listening skills and promoting appropriate behaviour was identified. The intricacies of adult patterns of communication in relation to behaviour management constitute a valuable area for further research.

The evidence of active listening failing to sustain appropriate behaviour was sparse. This was partly because effective behaviour management was concerned with providing children with success. We aimed to create a seamless continuum of behaviour management strategies to support the children's appropriate behaviour.

Further research would be needed to clarify why and when adults change from this style of management to alternatives.

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Further reading

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